

Spoofing the Subs April 3

Today, it is fairly well known that during World War II the British captured all German spies sent to the British Isles and persuaded many of them to transmit false information to their spymasters on the continent. This was managed by the Twenty Committee, whose name was usually written in Roman numerals, XX, to also represent the “double cross.” The British ran other deception operations, too, sometimes very elaborate ones, to mislead German intelligence about Allied plans. All this was possible because the British were able to deny the Germans most other sources of reliable intelligence.

ULTRA, that is, SIGINT from high-grade enemy encrypted communications, was important to all disinformation operations. It sometimes gave British planners insights into German preconceptions of Allied plans, which was used to craft the specifics of the false information and often would confirm that the Germans had been suckered into the deception.

April 2018 is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the most famous of these deceptions, Operation MINCEMEAT. The British disguised the corpse of a derelict Londoner as a military courier taking secret plans to a Mediterranean commander for the Allied invasion of Greece and Crete. They staged a fake airplane crash in the waters off Spain, confident the Spanish would share the information with the Germans. This operation was important in drawing German military strength away from the Allies’ real objective, Sicily.

The British ran additional deception operations, although not usually on the scale of MINCEMEAT. In these lesser actions, ULTRA also assisted the planners.

Ewan Montague, a major figure in the deception operations, was approached by Captain Roger Winn, a Royal Navy Officer with responsibility for tracking German submarines. Captain Winn was an old friend of Montague’s and also knew of his deception operations officially, although initially he apparently didn’t have much



faith in them. However, in the days just after the D-Day landings in Normandy, Captain Winn had a problem and, desperate, felt Montague might be able to help.

German submarines had recently adopted the snorkel, which allowed them to stay submerged and out of sight longer. However, U-boats still did have to surface fairly often; they had to get an accurate fix on their position at intervals. Captain Winn had found that many submarines were using a landmark off the south coast of Ireland to do this. If the subs followed the Irish coastline from any direction, they would eventually reach that landmark by which officers could calculate their exact location.

Captain Winn and the Director of Mining for the Royal Navy both agreed that sowing mines in the area would be the best option; it might sink some submarines. Even if that didn't happen, it would scare them off and keep submarine captains from getting the fix they needed. There was just one problem: all minelaying ships were fully committed to supporting the Allied forces building up in Normandy.

Thus, Captain Winn came to Montague to see if his friend could scare the German submarines away from the landmark without any actual minelaying.

One of the German spies who had been turned was codenamed TATE. He lived in a safe house under the custody of British intelligence, but his handler in Germany believed he roamed freely in London and that his parties for society figures, replete with black market liquor, had allowed him to cultivate British and American naval officers as sources of confidential information.

Thus, under control of Britain's counterintelligence agency, MI-5, TATE sent a radio message to his German handler on the continent reporting that an

inebriated British naval officer had bragged about setting a minefield just southwest of a German submarine rendezvous point near Ireland.

No reaction came from the continent about TATE's message.

Then the British got a stroke of good luck. A German submarine sank south of Ireland. No cause could be determined for the sinking, but SIGINT collectors were certain the submarine had not radioed anything about the situation before it sank. Thus, the cause of the sinking was unknown to the Germans also.

Again under MI-5 control, TATE sent a furious radio message to his German contact saying he was giving up his espionage activities, that there was no point risking his life if his information was being ignored. He said the drunken Royal Navy officer had boasted about the success of the new minefield in sinking a German sub. TATE expressed outrage that lives had been wasted because his information had been ignored.

All this, of course, was fiction. But the German spy handler on the continent believed it was true and the tantrum had an effect. First, the German spy handler replied with a soothing message to TATE, promising action.

More importantly, a few days later, an ULTRA message revealed an order sent to German U-boats proclaiming a prohibited area for submarine operations south of Ireland. This denied German submarines the use of the Irish landmark for establishing their position. Plus, this created a zone of some 3,600 square miles in which British and American ships could sail without fear of submarine attacks.

The coordination of secret actions and secret intelligence created a very positive result for the Allies in their war against German submarines.

An important source for this article was Ewan Montague's autobiography, *Beyond Top Secret Ultra*, plus H. F. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*.